

Idiom passivization from a cognitive linguistic viewpoint

Early idiom variation research focused on passivizability as one of the key properties of idiomaticity. Theories that try to account for the passive assume that the semantics of the idiom, more specifically the transitivity of the literal and figurative interpretation, as well as the absence or presence of coreference play a significant role (Newmeyer 1974, Akimoto 1983, Langlotz 2006). A representative sample of metaphorical and metonymic V NP idioms taken from idiom dictionaries are studied in a large corpus of American English and passive forms are retrieved to see how a cognitive linguistic approach can explain the attested forms or the non-occurrence of passive variants. The corpus used for this purpose is the COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English), which consists of over 400 million words. The nominal components of the idiom are preceded by various types of determiners: definite, indefinite, possessive, zero. The investigation focuses on how the metaphorical and metonymic conceptualization associated with the idiom predicts the acceptability of the passive and whether that prediction is borne out. Following Langacker (1991), passivization will be viewed as the reversal of the trajector/landmark alignment, and in accordance with Langlotz (2006), idioms are viewed as complex constructions whose base-form images can be modified in discourse to fit the requirements of the specific contextual meaning. Nunberg et al. (1994) claim that passivizability depends on whether the idiom components have individual figurative senses or not (idiomatically combining expressions vs idiomatic phrases). Previous corpus-based research by the author suggests that on the one hand passivization is possible even if the idiom component is not meaningful at the figurative level (*he knew when his leg was being pulled*), and, on the other hand, the passive does not always occur with motivated decomposable idioms such as *miss the boat* or *weather the storm*. This seems to support Moon's (1998) claim that strong fossilization is a significant factor in this area of the grammar. Yet, we aim to find motivation for the (non)occurrence of the passive.

References

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